

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE 1

How to Cite: Duffy, K. (2019) Book Review: Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. *Gothic Nature*. 1, 236-238. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: 14 September 2019

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a double-blind process.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Gothic Nature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*

(New York: Auteur, 2017)

Ken Duffy

Pity us poor folk horror fans. Of all of subgenres of horror, folk horror seems to contain the fewest on-screen hours to enjoy. Once we have binged upon the triumvirate of Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968), Piers Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and Robin Hardy's *The Wickerman* (1973), we find ourselves scrambling for further examples. Adam Scovell's book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) presents an excellent resource for those wishing to explore this sub-genre in more academic detail and along the way, pick up a viewing list of folk horror film and television.

Part of the problem is the issue of definition. What makes a horror film, book, or television series 'folk horror'? If it requires a setting in the past like *Witchfinder* and *Claw*, then *Wickerman* is out. If it requires a folkloric theme, *then* it might accidentally draw in *Halloween III* due to the pivotal role of witchcraft at Samhain. Thankfully, Scovell knows that to define is also to constrict. He therefore explores folk horror through a device which he introduces as the 'folk horror chain', which he defines as 'a linking set of narrative traits that have causational and interlinking consequences' (p. 14). These narrative traits centre on themes of landscape and isolation, on comparisons between skewed systems and contemporary morality, and on 'summonings', which may or may not be supernatural.

With this framework, Scovell opens up the genre to include several diverse examples not usually considered folk horror by the casual viewer. For instance, he discusses Neil Marshall's *Dog Soldiers* (2002), as its setting in an isolated farmhouse suddenly attacked by werewolves succinctly illustrates themes of isolation, rurality, and a summoning. He also includes Roy Ward Baker's *Quatermass and the Pitt* (1967), a film traditionally classified as science fiction. Scovell argues that Baker's film follows the folk horror chain by tying its urban setting to folkloric connections with the devil and resurrecting ancient and skewed beliefs about Martians which created *homo sapiens*. Finally, the film culminates in the destruction caused by the unearthing of a Martian artefact, illustrating the summoning of a long-buried evil, which is intrinsic to the folk horror train.

Scovell draws substantially on what he calls the ‘heroic’ BBC plays of the 1970s, such as Trevor Ray and Jeremy Burnham’s *Children of the Stones* (1977) and Alan Garner’s *Red Shift* (1979). Influenced by the summer of love’s equinox into the winter of discontent, these writers and directors delighted in showing the perversions of Britain’s ancient past brought to horrifying ends. In his chapter exploring hauntology, Scovell talks about how occultism was drawn into the culture of late 1960s and early 1970s Britain. From musicians Donovan, Led Zeppelin, and Black Sabbath to what the author calls ‘The Unholy Trinity’ of the films *Witchfinder*, *Claw*, and *Wickerman*, British folklore and occultism provided ample material for inspiration, dragging the Victorian view of the idyllic English countryside into the dark underbelly of post-war British dissatisfaction. Perhaps because of this, one of the most appealing aspects of folk horror is that while always relishing in the delightfully eerie, it always seems so much more rock-and-roll than some of its fellow horror sub-genres.

By organising his chapters by theme rather than chronology, Scovell is able to analyse the same works under several different headings such as ‘Rurality’ and ‘Topography’. He is also able to address how occultism, or perceived occultism, is examined how these works contribute to the expansion of the genre. In particular, Scovell draws heavily on the adapted plays of M.R. James produced during this period by the BBC. From *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* (1968) to *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), he analyses this material in great detail, returning to the same works throughout the book when the theme under examination requires it.

Though this method risks becoming repetitive, it never does. Instead, it shows how the works under examination, be they works by M.R. James or *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, can be analysed through different thematic prisms to reveal the ideas contained within. This methodology shows how an obscure twenty minute BBC television play like *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* can say as much about folk horror as cult classics like *The Wickerman*. The book’s great advantage is that it does not presuppose familiarity with the major or minor works of the genre, and though it would be easy for Scovell’s synopses of each work under consideration to become tedious, especially to the reader who is already familiar with them, they never do. His enthusiasm for the genre drips from the page like the Technicolor blood of a Hammer classic. Any study on film can either fall into a series of backstage technical details, or an overly-philosophical investigation where the author frantically tries to find Jungian value in *Cannibal*

Holocaust. Fortunately, Scovell does not sacrifice the academic to the accessible or vice versa. His analysis is not only valuable, but entertaining.

The book deals almost exclusively with British folk horror. While this facilitates a stricter focus, it would have been interesting to see more discussion, here, of how the folk horror chain can be applied to film and television from other countries. A complete exploration of the genre should look, for example, at the silent masterpiece Benjamin Christensen's *Haxan* (1922), which represents one of the first complete views of the themes and aesthetics of folk horror and delivers the genuine sense of eeriness and discomfort that must seemingly be present in any good example of the genre. Scovell might also consider how folk horror has manifested itself in North American Cinema, given that settler colonial folklore in North America developed relatively recently. It would be interesting to see how the folk horror chain is manifested in the rural isolation of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) or the hostile natural world explored in *Jug Face* (2013). Though American cinema is mentioned, it is never examined in detail.

Scovell does, however, take his final chapter into the new millennium. Films such as Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2013) and *A Field in England* (2013) and Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015) have arguably rejuvenated folk horror after so many years of being in danger of becoming a historical footnote in the annals of horror cinema. It may seem at first glance that *Kill List*—a story of two hitmen set in the modern day—does not fit a predetermined definition of folk horror. But Scovell's enlightening examination of folk horror expands the genre beyond the unholy trinity of *Witchfinder*, *Claw*, and *Wickerman*. *Folk Horror* broadens the boundaries of our attention and deepens our understanding of this complex and much-loved subgenre in a way that is as engaging as it is enlightening. It encourages us to broaden our understanding and questions of this genre; it teaches us to seek and locate evidence that the relics of folk horror indeed surround us.